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ABSTRACT

This guide offers advice to help people cope with a variety of losses, including losses associated with divorce, retirement, relocation, disability, or illness, and the loss of a pet, financial security, independence, or control and decision making. It discusses what one can expect when one suffers a loss and how to handle grief. Common reactions to grief, including physical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual reactions, are listed. A number of suggestions are made for ways that people experiencing loss and grief can help themselves: accept and talk about their feelings; give themselves time; accept support from others; resume their daily routines; be good to themselves; avoid alcohol and unnecessary medications; postpone major decisions; expect hard times; and seek professional help if needed. The conclusion reiterates the notion that grief takes time and hard work. A brief bibliography suggests publications for further reading. (NB)

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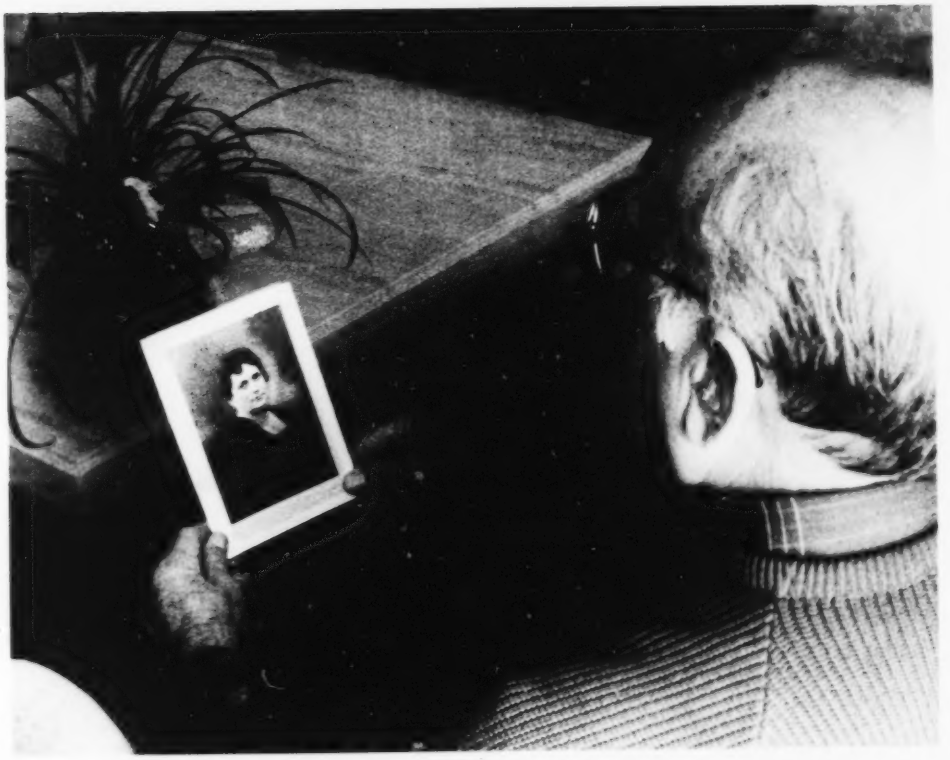
COPING WITH YOUR LOSS AND GRIEF



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COPING WITH YOUR LOSS AND GRIEF

V.L. Schmall

Life is filled with changes. Sometimes those changes involve loss. When we lose someone or something important to us, we grieve. Although the death of a loved one is generally the most intensely and deeply felt loss, many life changes can involve loss and cause us to grieve.

- Divorce or severing of a relationship
- Loss of a job
- Retirement
- Loss of health or mobility
- Giving up a dream
- Loss of a body part
- Moving from a home or community
- Loss of status or influence
- Loss of a pet
- Loss of independence
- Loss of financial security
- Disability—in oneself or a family member
- Loss of independence
- Loss of control and decision making

Loss is painful. It represents an ending. In his book, *Transitions*, William Bridges says, "Endings are experiences of dying. They are ordeals and sometimes challenge so basically our sense of who we are that we believe they will be the end of us . . ." Every area of life—physical, emotional, spiritual, and social—can be affected by a major loss.

The pain created by a loss is an emotional wound that needs healing. For the healing to occur, we need to grieve for the loss and all it represents. If we do not allow ourselves to grieve, the wound may scab over, but not heal completely.

Grieving is hard work and involves a range of feelings. It requires that we make adjustments, learn new skills, and take charge of our lives. It can leave us physically and emotionally exhausted. However, if avoided, grieving can create its own problems. We can become physically or emotionally ill and not be able to move forward and fully experience life.

Vicki L. Schmall, Extension gerontology specialist, Oregon State University.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

Learning about grief is helpful. Although knowing what's happening does not erase the pain, it can reduce the fear. Although everyone experiences loss and grief, no two people respond to the same situation in exactly the same way.

The most common initial reaction to a significant loss is denial and shock. You may have felt, "This can't really be happening" or "It's a bad dream." You may have felt emotionally numb. This numbness is said to be nature's way of helping us through an experience that otherwise would be overwhelmingly intolerable and painful. It serves to deaden the pain and give us the time we need to absorb what has happened, mobilize our internal resources, and prepare for the difficult times ahead.

Once the numbness lifts, we are hit with the reality of the loss. You are likely to experience a range of emotions from tremendous sadness to helplessness, anger, guilt, or fear. You may experience erratic shifts in mood. See page 5 for common reactions during grief.

Anger and guilt tend to be difficult emotions for many people. Anger is especially confusing when it is felt towards the person who died; yet, this feeling is common. It's important to remember that feelings are neither right or wrong, nor good or bad; they just *are*. It's what we do with those feelings that is either good or bad. If we don't resolve these feelings, we may direct the anger at others in hurtful ways or become severely depressed. In dealing with pain, it is important to avoid creating more pain for yourself or others.

Working through grief requires taking one moment, one hour, one day at a time. At times, you may find it hard to believe you will ever get over the intense and painful feelings, but you will adjust—if you want to.

Successful adjustment does not mean you become "your old self again." You will be changed by the experience—life will be forever different. However, you do have a choice. You can choose to learn and grow from a painful or tragic experience or become embittered.

Successful adjustment also does not mean you forget the person who died or whatever loss you have experienced. It means that you are able to remember and talk about "what was" without it causing the "stabbing pain" it once did.

COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF

Grief causes tremendous turmoil in every aspect of life and involves a wide range of physical, emotional, and spiritual responses. You may find yourself overwhelmed and frightened by the feelings, thoughts and emotions. Any of the following can be characteristic—and are normal.

Physical

Grief can cause physical symptoms. Your body "feels" the emotional loss.

- Knot in the stomach
- Changes in appetite
- Tightness or lump in the throat
- Frequent sighing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in chest
- Fatigue and lack of energy, unrelieved by sleep
- Muscle weakness
- Dry mouth
- Nausea, diarrhea, indigestion
- Feeling "hollow" or "emptied out"
- Feeling weak or faint
- Headaches
- General achiness
- Oversensitivity to noise

Behavioral

- Being immobilized, unable to act
- Restless overactivity (unable to sit still or stay with a task)
- Sleeplessness or oversleeping
- Forgetfulness
- Unable to begin and maintain normal daily activity
- Lack of motivation or energy
- Crying, sobbing (often at unexpected times)
- Talking to the person who has died
- Social withdrawal

Feelings

- Shock, numbness, disbelief
- Anxiety, panic *(What will I do now? How will I manage?)*
- Anger *(Why me?)*
- Guilt *(Why didn't I . . . ? I should have . . .)*
- Intense sadness
- Depression
- Helplessness, powerlessness
- Everything is unreal, feeling detached
- Fears: "of going crazy," of the future
- Envy of others who have not experienced a loss (still have

their spouse, their home, their health)

- Relief (that the person's suffering is over; burden of caregiving is over)
- Loneliness
- Indifference

Thought patterns

Many different thought patterns occur during grief. When not understood as normal, some people fear they are going crazy.

- Denial (difficulty believing the loss is real)
- Poor concentration
- Disorganization
- Confusion
- Preoccupation with the loss and/or circumstances surrounding it
- Seeing or hearing the person who died
- Dreams (e.g. of person who died)
- Repetition (thinking about or retelling the events surrounding the loss over and over)
- Anticipation (subconsciously expecting the person who died to return)
- Yearning and longing for person who died or for "what was"

Spiritual

Even if you have a strong faith, you may find it is shaken by a significant loss.

- Anger directed toward God, clergy or religion in general
- Consolation provided by belief or scripture
- Examining the meaning of life
- Seeking meaning in the loss itself
- Doubts
- Strengthening of beliefs
- Wavering of faith
- Searching for evidence of afterlife
- Change in priorities (e.g. increased or decreased tolerance for minor irritations in life)

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

To successfully work through your grief, you must experience the emotional pain. You can't deaden it, run away from it, or escape it in any other way if you are truly going to come out of it a whole and healthy person. While you will need the support from others, there are things you can do to help yourself move through a loss experience and begin to put your life together again.

Accept and talk about your feelings

One of the most harmful things you can do is to bottle up your feelings. Denying or repressing feelings often intensifies and prolongs working through grief. It's been said that sorrow which is never spoken is the heaviest load to bear. An old Turkish proverb states "He that conceals his grief finds no remedy for it." People who avoid conscious grieving generally break down emotionally, physically, or both.

It's okay to cry. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be sad. You may think you are going crazy. This is a common reaction. You are not losing your mind—you are only reacting to your loss.

Most people find that talking about their feelings helps them to deal with and accept their loss. Some find that doing something physical—for example, pounding a pillow or screaming out loud in a private place—is helpful. In whatever way you express your feelings, be sure it is not harmful to others or yourself.

If you don't let your feelings out, they will come out at some other time or in some other way. You may become depressed or physically ill. An emotion that is denied expression is not destroyed.

Expressing feelings and thoughts in a journal may be helpful. Write about your feelings.

I feel betrayed because . . .
I feel scared because . . .
I feel angry because . . .

Keeping a journal also can provide a way to measure your progress. It can help to look at what you wrote 2 or 6 months ago and compare it with the present.

Give yourself the time you need

Grieving takes time. It can't be hurried. Just as it takes time for broken bones to heal, it takes time for broken hearts and spirits to heal.

There is no fixed time period for grieving. It varies from person to person. However, many people do not understand grief and may think you can just "snap out of it" or "should be getting over it" much sooner than is realistic. Try not to judge yourself by the expectations of others.

Grieving is not something we can just "snap out of." One must grow out of it, and that takes time and effort.

Accept support from others

With a physical wound we allow others to take care of us; we also need to do the same with emotional wounds. Accept the

support and help of others. Don't expect family and friends to "read your mind" and know when you need help and the specific help you need—they can't. It's important, too, not to build a wall around yourself and distance yourself from others for fear of being hurt again.

If others do not offer help, ask for it. Often people don't help because they don't know what to do. They may be afraid of making a mistake—of saying or doing the "wrong thing"—or feel awkward.

Having the support of at least one other person is critical to adjustment. People who have no support are most likely to do poorly. Find someone who will listen nonjudgmentally and accept your feelings, and with whom you feel comfortable talking freely. Recognize that some of your family and friends may be uncomfortable with your feelings and want you to be your "old self" again.

It's also often difficult for family to support each other when each family member is grieving. Communicating with family and respecting each family member's way of grieving are important to coping and growing as a family through grief.

If you don't have family or a friend you can talk to about your feelings, consider a support group. Attending a support group of persons experiencing a similar loss can be therapeutic and a source of hope, understanding, and encouragement. Information about support groups in your area may be available from the pastoral care or social work department at the hospital, the local mental health center, your clergy, hospice program, or senior center.

Resume your daily routine

The sooner you can return to your daily activities, the better. Search for activities that are meaningful to you—this can help give a new purpose to life. Social activity in general has a positive influence on adjustment. Some people have found that one of the best ways to move through grief is to do something for someone else. This does not mean you forget what has happened. But involvement in activities can help fill the void created by a loss.

Making yourself get up at a certain time every day, writing a list of tasks for yourself, and staying productive can give you a sense of control. If you depended upon your partner to structure your life for you, you may find it particularly difficult to develop interests.

Be good to yourself

Months after the death of her husband, Juliet wrote, "I always thought that grief was an emotion and probably mental. I was shocked, and still am, at the effects on the body."

The stress of grief can cause physical problems. Research shows that people who experience a significant loss, particularly the death of a loved one, are more likely to become ill within six months after the loss. This is also a time when you may be more accident prone and more vulnerable to a

flare-up of an existing medical condition. Eating well, getting adequate sleep and rest, and exercising regularly are important. Exercise helps reduce stress, work off frustrations, and aid sleep.

If you are under a doctor's care for a pre-existing medical condition, do not discontinue that care.

Avoid alcohol and unnecessary medications

A mild sedative or tranquilizer may provide some initial needed relief. However, drugs or alcohol taken to reduce or mask the pain are harmful—they only stop, delay, or prolong grief, which means you'll simply have to face the loss later. Sedating medication, if used at all, should be only a temporary measure to help you through the initial shock.

Postpone major decisions

Postpone making major decisions—for example, moving, giving away possessions, or reinvesting finances—until after the period of intense grief, if at all possible. Whatever can wait should wait.

Emotions impair judgment, and major decisions made during a time of emotional upheaval are frequently regretted later. You need time to reestablish balance in your life, regain self-confidence, and find out what the "new you" will need and want. Remaining in a familiar environment can provide a sense of security and stability at a time of emotional upheaval.

Expect hard times

Evenings, weekends, or special events—birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays—are generally difficult during the first year following divorce or the death of a loved one. Analyze what it is that makes certain times especially difficult and then make specific plans for those times. Working through hard times is a highly individual task. Schedule activities that you find particularly comforting during these time periods.

A certain day of the week or time of day, favorite foods, colognes, music, or events can also make you painfully aware of a person's absence. Any place or event that is closely associated with a person who died—going to church or participating in certain activities—may be temporarily painful for you.

Holidays, and especially family gatherings, can be particularly difficult after a divorce or death. These events may only serve to remind you of the changes in your life. Festive occasions, especially shortly after a death, are often difficult because of the expectation that we "should" be happy, should be having a great time. The difference between these "shoulds" and our actual feelings often increase our sense of loss. To make these events easier:

- Plan ahead how you will spend the special days.
- Ask yourself what traditions you want to keep—what really has to be done versus what you feel you "ought to do."

- Share your feelings with family.
- Talk honestly with family members as you make your plans.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP IF NEEDED

If your grief persists, if you lash out in anger at people around you, if you become depressed and feel life is hopeless, or if you are considering suicide, seek professional help. Depression can complicate the grieving process and it requires treatment.

Psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy, social workers, counselors, and grief therapists can all help a person who is grieving. They can help us adjust to loss, find solutions to difficult situations, and resolve feelings such as anger, guilt, or despair which may keep us from full functioning.

CONCLUSION

There are no easy answers or short cuts to working through grief. It's a difficult process and it takes time—sometimes, a very long time. It cannot be accomplished without pain, but the pain will diminish. Remember, too, it is not possible to get back to "normal," if "normal" means the way things used to be. Life has changed.

Most importantly, have realistic expectations of yourself. Grief takes **time** and **hard work**. You will get better. Although some days you may just seem to exist, gradually you will feel better and better. Grief is like an ocean—it ebbs and flows; sometimes it rolls in gently; other times it pounds hard. With time, the pain of grief will lessen, or in Juliet's words, "I have come to the place where memories are sweet, not painful as they were at first."

But It Hurts . . . Differently

There is no way to predict
how you will feel.

The reactions of grief are
not like recipes,
with certain ingredients,
and certain results.

Each person mourns in a different way.

You may cry hysterically,
or
you may remain outwardly controlled,
showing little emotion.

You may lash out in anger against
your family and friends,
or
you may express your gratitude
for their concern and dedication.

You may be calm one moment—
in turmoil the next.

Reactions are varied and
contradictory.

Grief is universal.
At the same time it
is extremely personal.

Heal in your own way.

—Earl A. Grollman
Living When A Loved One Has Died

FOR FURTHER READING

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You also may call Agricultural Communications at Oregon State University, (503) 737-2513, to learn the availability and current price of the publications.

Publications Orders
Agricultural Communications
Oregon State University
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Alcohol Problems in Later Life by V.L. Schmall, C.L. Gobeli, and R.E. Stiehl. Pacific Northwest Extension publication 342, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, 1989. 75¢.

Depression in Later Life by V.L. Schmall, L. Lawson, and R.E. Stiehl. Pacific Northwest Extension publication 347, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, 1992. $1.50.

Grief in Children by J. Hare. Pacific Northwest Extension publication 391, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, 1992. 75¢.

Loss and Grief in Later Life by V.L. Schmall. Pacific Northwest Extension publication 439, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, 1993. $1.00.

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